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## Talking about suicide attempt is therapeutic

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The fog has lifted. The marriage is restored. The tears have stopped.

Because the secret is out.

John Gallagher, 57, of Royersford, holder of an MBA from St. Joe's, a man with a seemingly perfect life - a wife, four children, a job as a financial analyst - attempted suicide in 1999.

For nearly nine years, he was too ashamed to talk about that leap from a third-floor hospital window that crushed his legs, his silence a locked box that all but destroyed his family.

"I never even told my father the truth," Gallagher said. "I said that I was in an accident. I wanted to pretend it never happened, although I suffer with pain every day from my injuries."

For five of those years, Gallagher and his wife, Trisha, were separated, getting back together only for the children two years ago.

But in the last two months, prompted by an article he read in The Inquirer about a student's attempt at suicide, John and Trisha have been visiting churches and service clubs, telling their story.

That openness has changed their lives.

"My wife and I have never been this close," he said.

"We now have a purpose together," said Trisha.

Their children, now young adults, can't believe that their father has gone public, or how it has invigorated him. This, they said, was a father whose first commandment to his children was: Don't embarrass the family.

"I was in shock," said daughter Robin, 25. "It's been so hush-hush for so long."

Added Katelyn, 23: "We had so many different stories - he fell down the stairs, he was in a car accident. Our little brother didn't know the truth for a couple of years."

In 1998, the family had been living for a dozen years in Richboro, Bucks County. Gallagher was working for Bristol-Myers Squibb. The children were in Catholic school. They had soccer, Girl Scouts . . . a classic suburban life - at least on the outside.

Then Gallagher told his wife that his company was cutting back, that he had to find a new job. The fear of being unable to provide for his family overwhelmed him.

Neither John nor Trisha understood why he was growing more dysfunctional by the day. He couldn't sleep, suffered searing headaches, lost so much weight - 60 pounds - that he began wearing two sets of clothes so people would stop noticing. He couldn't concentrate.

On April 28, 1999, as he drove to work, he pulled over and stood behind his car, breathing in all the carbon monoxide he could.

"It was not that I wanted to die," he recalled. "I just wanted this horrid feeling inside of me to stop. It seemed that taking my own life was the only solution for it. But the solution was too final."



AKIRA SUWA / Inquirer Staff

Sharing a meal in Doylestown, John Gallagher is flanked by his family (from left): daughters Robin and Katelyn, and wife Trisha. For years, Gallagher hid that he tried to die by jumping from a window.

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He drove home and told his wife. She took him to Warminster Hospital.

Two days later, in a third-floor hospital waiting room, Trisha got out a photo album to remind John of all the good times, to make him appreciate his life. Instead, it had the opposite effect: John felt he would never know such joy again.

Trisha left to phone the children. John went out the window.

Luckily - and he attributes this to God - he landed feet-first.

After six weeks in the hospital, Gallagher went home, filled with shame and embarrassment. The family tried to mask the truth.

At picnics and family functions, Trisha would quietly request those gathered not to ask John, who was in a wheelchair for months, what happened. They perpetuated all manner of lies and excuses - though one time a note was stuck in the front door: "Trisha, you don't have to keep the secret. A lot of us know what happened. We want to help you."

For Trisha, the bottled-up truth created so much pressure that sometimes she told complete strangers, including a greeter at a Wal-Mart store, that her husband didn't really fall down the stairs but had tried to kill himself.

"Then I'd swear her to secrecy, that she wouldn't tell anyone," Trisha recalled. "I felt so guilty and disloyal to my husband when I shared our business."

With the right medication and therapy, John got his depression under control. He just wanted to put the past behind him. But Trisha wanted to talk about it and lived in fear he'd try again. In 2001, he moved out.

Five years later, because of issues with the children, they moved back together in Royersford, but went their separate ways. He got a less stressful job that he enjoys, selling clothes at Joseph A. Bank in Haverford.

The family functioned, but as Katelyn noted, "We were a crying family. There were always a lot of tears."

Then on Jan. 20, Gallagher read a story about an Upper Merion High School senior who suffered from depression and jumped from a ninth-floor window. Like Gallagher, Jordan Burnham survived. Unlike John, he shared his story and told how depression had twisted his mind.

John made Trisha read the story. That day, he decided to speak out, maybe even write a book about his bout.

Last Sunday, at Circle of Miracles, a church in Doylestown, he and Trisha told of how their path could be anyone's.

After he finished, a church member, John Walther, said: "You've really got guts."

Replied Gallagher: "It took me nine years."

Many who attended were moved. A woman started to thank Gallagher, but before she could get out the first words, she was in tears. John put his arm around her.

"Just yesterday, my son, he's 16, told me he doesn't want to be here anymore," she said. "He says life's too hard. Now I understand why he can't sleep, why he has the constant headaches and anger."

Gallagher told the group: "If I can help one person, help one family, avoid going through the turmoil we went through, I would feel so successful and useful."

Later that morning, John and Trisha met their two daughters for breakfast nearby.

"We're a crying family," said Katelyn again, but she noted that in the last couple months, that had not been the case.

"I'm finally understanding," she said, "my family isn't suffering."